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INDIANA COLLECTION

Portage

THE HISTORY

Before the existence of Portage, Indiana, or even the existence of the United States, the Portage area was originally inhabited by Mound Builders; however, when the first Europeans came into the area, they found only the Wea Indians, who, later, were pushed out of the area by the war-loving tribe of Potawatomi Indians. The French first traded with the Potawatomi and it is believed that Father Claude Allouez and Father Claude Dablon were the first explorers of the Portage area around 1672. The Potawatomi called the entire area "Chick-i-a-go," which means "all gone," and from which the name "Chicago" developed.

The British claimed the area from 1759 to 1796 and the area was invaded by a Spanish land force from St. Louis in 1781, which was commanded by Don Eugenio Pierre. We do not know what happened to the Spanish; however, the United States claimed the area in 1783. The first settler in the area was Joseph Bailey, who settled east of Portage and established a trading post in 1822. In 1831, a road was built through the area, connecting Fort Dearborn with Detroit. In 1833, a stage line followed the same route. In that year Samuel Putnam Robbins moved into the area and in 1834, the Jacob Wolfe family came into the area, followed by several other families. Wolfe would build a farm of 4,500 acres, the largest in Porter County.

In 1836, Porter County and Portage Township were created by the State of Indiana. The first school was built in 1840, and was known as the Robbins School. Most of the first settlers in the area were farmers and merchants. In 1852 the first railroad in Porter County, the Michigan Central, came through the Portage area, connecting Chicago with New York. It should be pointed out that part of the "Underground Railroad" for runaway slaves ran through Portage. A "Smith Family" built a house in the area in 1857 to house runaway slaves bound for Canada. Later the family disappeared without a trace.

The development of a steel company in the Gary, Indiana area in 1906 caused the area to grow, but the greatest growth came in 1959, when the National Steel Company decided to build a plant in Portage. This was followed by the development of a deep water port in 1961 by the State of Indiana, and by the start of a large steel plant by Bethlehem Steel Company, bordering Portage, in 1963.

The development of the Portage-Burns Waterway played an important role in the development of Portage. As far back as 1908, Mr. Randall Burns petitioned the County to establish a drainage ditch into Lake Michigan, which would permit the use of many acres of swamp land in the Portage area. A contract was let to accomplish this task; however, there was opposition by the railroads and therefore several court cases took place. The issue was finally resolved by the U.S. Supreme Court, but it was not until 1928 before the channel was made. Today, this channel is called "The Portage-Burns Waterway" and it harbors approximately 1,000 boats during the summer months.

1925 or thereabouts

Portage was incorporated as a town in 1959. The incorporation took in the three small communities of Crisman, Garyton, and McCool. In 1968, Portage was incorporated as a city due to its rapid growth. Portage is one of the youngest, fastest-growing cities in Indiana.